



Army Transforming America

The Interstate Highway System

BEFORE passage of the 1956 National Defense and Interstate Highway Act, road conditions in the United States varied greatly. This contributed to high death and injury rates, a waste of billions of dollars in detours and traffic jams, and a limited ability to respond to local disasters and national emergencies. President Dwight D. Eisenhower witnessed the primitive state of America's roadway system as a young lieutenant colonel in 1919, when he accompanied the Army's first transcontinental motor convoy from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco, Calif.

Eighty-one vehicles, including nine motorcycles, traveled 3,251 miles in 62 days to test the mobility of the Army under simulated wartime conditions. The often-primitive state of the roads exposed the convoy to what one historian called an endless series of difficulties: "Vehicles stuck in mud or sand; trucks and other equipment crashing through wooden bridges; roads as slippery as ice or the consistency of 'gumbo.'"

The young lieutenant colonel observing the Army's harrowing coast-to-coast trek remembered its lessons. Later, as the supreme allied commander in Europe during World War II, Eisenhower also noted the ease with which the enemy moved on German autobahns. "The old convoy," he recalled, "had started me thinking about good, two-lane highways, but Germany had made me see the wisdom of broader ribbons across the land," he said.

As president, Eisenhower recognized the inadequacies of two-lane state roads that meandered indirectly to their destinations and could not handle the weight and size of military traffic. He worked with Congress to craft legislation that provided a new highway system with adequate federal financing and practical design and engineering. These essential elements have ensured that motorists today can journey unimpeded across vast distances in a relatively short time.

Eisenhower noted that without a reliable, dynamic transportation system, the United States would be a mere alliance of many separate parts. Instead, the interstate highway system has united the nation economically, culturally and financially in countless ways. It has, in Ike's words, literally "changed the face of America." — *CPT Patrick Swan*